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ABSTRACT

This consumer guide describes what the James Comer School Development Program is, how it got started, and its goals and principles; and presents an evaluation of its success. The program, which was started 25 years ago by a child psychiatrist (James Comer), is designed to improve the educational experience of poor minority youth. It works on the notion that poor academic performance is largely due to a failure to bridge the social and cultural gaps between home and school. The program's principles are that schools must do the following: (1) review problems in open discussion in a no-fault atmosphere; (2) develop collaborative working relationships among all concerned parties in and outside the school; and (3) reach decisions by consensus rather than decree. School planning and management teams, a mental health team, and a parents' group are among the program's critical components. Thus far, the Comer Program has been shown to improve social skills, raise educational achievement, and increase attendance levels among students from more than 250 elementary schools and high schools in 19 states. While other programs focus on either enriching curriculum development or emphasizing cognitive practices that increase learning, the Comer program emphasizes improved school climate. Two resources for more information are listed. (Contains 4 references.) (GLR)

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The Comer School Development Program

What is it? James Comer's School Development Program, also known as the Comer Process, is intended to improve the educational experience of poor minority youth. Improvement is attained by building supportive bonds among children, parents, and school staff *to promote a positive school climate*.

How did it get started? More than 25 years ago, child psychiatrist James Comer and his colleagues at Yale Child Study Center experimented with a 2-year school intervention program in two inner-city elementary schools in New Haven, Connecticut. Based on his observations, Mr. Comer concluded that children's experiences at home and in school deeply affect their psychosocial development, which in turn shapes their academic achievement. Conversely, poor academic performance is in large part a function of the failure to bridge the social and cultural gaps between home and school.

What are its goals? The School Development Program is designed to create a school environment where children feel comfortable, valued, and secure. In this environment, children will form positive emotional bonds with school staff and parents and a positive attitude toward the school program, which promotes the children's overall development and, in turn, facilitates academic learning.

What are its principles? Three principles underlie the Comer Process:

- Schools must review problems in open discussion in a *no-fault* atmosphere;
- Each school must develop *collaborative working relationships* among principals, parents, teachers, community leaders, superintendents, and health-care workers; and
- All decisions must be reached by *consensus* rather than by decree.

How does it work? The School Development Program relies on staff collaboration and parent involvement to promote expectations of high student achievement. Each Comer school implements the program differently depending on the personalities of its staff and the specific needs of the school and its students.

Each Comer school is governed by the following three teams:

- *The School Planning and Management Team.* This building-level governing and management body is headed by the principal and comprises teachers, administrators, parents, support staff, and a child development specialist. As a team they are responsible for identifying targets for social and academic improvement, establishing policy guidelines, developing systematic school plans, responding to problems, and monitoring program activities.
- *The Mental Health Team.* This team is headed by the principal and includes teachers, administrators, psychologists, social workers, and nurses. Together they analyze social and behavioral patterns within the school and determine how to solve recurring problems, applying child development principles in their decision making.

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- *The Parents' Group*. The goal of this group is to involve parents in all levels of school activity, from volunteering in the classroom to school governance.

How successful is it? Many of the schools that have adopted the Comer Process have been evaluated and judged to be successful based on improved social skills and raised educational achievement and attendance levels. Given this track record and the current interest in school reform, the Comer Process has gained renewed attention. The School Development Program has been implemented at more than 250 schools (elementary through high school) in 19 states; plans call for expanding it to entire school districts. Among documented successful programs now in operation are Lincoln Bassett Community School in New Haven, Connecticut; Barnaby Manor Elementary School in Oxon Hill, Maryland; and Valencia Park Center in San Diego, California.

How does it compare to similar programs? Related approaches to school restructuring include Henry Levin's Accelerated Schools and Robert Slavin's Success for All. All three approaches use staff collaboration, parent involvement, and expectations of high student achievement to improve schools. Where Levin's program focuses on providing an enriched and accelerated curriculum for disadvantaged students, and Slavin's program stresses cognitive practices that increase learning, the Comer Process emphasizes improved school climate.

Where can I get more information?

School Development Program
Yale Child Study Center
230 South Frontage Road
P.O. Box 3333
New Haven, CT 06510

ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education
Institute for Urban and Minority Education
Main Hall, Room 303
525 West 120th Street, Box 40
Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, NY 10027–9987
(212) 678–3433

References:

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by Pat Coulter

This is the sixth *Education Research CONSUMER GUIDE*—a new series published for teachers, parents, and others interested in current education themes.

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